FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
October 14, 2001

Your Center of Value
John M. Buchanan

We are free agents. . . . We have been given the freedom to "choose ourselves." . . . The greatest power we have in life is the power to decide what we want to do with our lives, what we want to give them to.

Huston Smith
Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

The Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 E. Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

YOUR CENTER OF VALUE
October 14, 2001

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 66:1-12
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
Luke 16:1-13

Dear God, we are thankful to be here this morning with one another and with you. We are thankful for the freedom to be here — for the time, this hour, this new day full of potential and promise. We are thankful for your promise that when we gather in your name you will be in our midst. Now speak the word you have for us today. Silence in us any voice but yours—so that we may hear and believe and trust you and then live our lives faithfully, joyfully, courageously, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

One week ago, on World Communion Sunday, it was my privilege to be in the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church of Havana. Seventeen of us from the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago had traveled to Cuba on Thursday, and on Sunday morning we joined our hosts in worship. The church is located in old Havana, with its narrow streets and crumbling buildings, the result of forty years of neglect. The church, which has been there since 1890, is the best-looking building around. On World Communion Sunday, the sanctuary was full with people sitting in the aisles and standing in the back. It was also very hot. My sixteen traveling companions were dutifully in their pews at 10:30—and they didn't hear the benediction until almost 1:30. (Let me assure you that my sermon consumed just twenty minutes of that time.)

It was an experience none of us will forget. We were warmly welcomed, and introduced, and greeted. We sang familiar hymns—in Spanish—"Santo, Santo, Santo," "Holy, Holy, Holy." We heard a marvelous youth choir and adult choir. I was privileged to participate in three infant baptisms—with parents, brothers and sisters, and particularly attentive grandparents gathered around each baby—and an adult baptism. A fine young man, twenty-one, the choir director, a member of the national opera company, publicly proclaimed his faith in Jesus Christ—in a place where that identification as a Christian has been difficult in the past—and knelt as the waters of baptism ran down over his forehead, mixed with his own tears, and dripped onto his choir robe.

When it came time to share the bread and cup, each one of us knew that we were uniquely and deeply blessed to be with people, young and old, who had been put to the test, who had kept the faith, who somewhere along the line, many times probably, had been forced to make choices about what really mattered to them, what they truly and finally believed in, and then had to pay the price for those choices. I was humbled by that.

In 1959, Fidel Castro's revolutionary forces ousted a corrupt and cruel dictatorship, which had historical ties to our nation. By 1961, Cuba was a Communist dictatorship whose chief sponsor, providing 70 percent of the government's support ultimately, was the Soviet Union. Cuba

became an officially atheist state. An elaborate system of church schools, many of them Presbyterian, were either shut down or appropriated by the government. So were religious hospitals and clinics. The church was forbidden to evangelize, to produce printed materials, or to provide social services. Known church member were not allowed to be party members and thus denied access to good jobs and education. The church could not purchase anything—not even paper.

In 1959, there were sixty-five ordained Presbyterian ministers in Cuba. By 1965, there were seventeen. Church attendance dropped dramatically. Once thriving congregations became small communities of a few persons, mostly elderly people, no young people, no children. Somehow they held on.

Our government began to reduce and then eliminate all forms of American aid, until a total embargo was in place—prohibiting giving or spending American dollars in Cuba, an embargo, by the way, which has utterly failed in its objective and succeeded only in causing enormous suffering for the Cuban people and provided the Castro regime a priceless gift of propaganda, victimization and martyrdom. The Cuban church had no money, no resources, one third of its ministers trying to serve scattered churches with no transportation. Hector Mendez, our host and pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Havana, had entered the seminary in the early days of the revolution. After he was ordained in the early 60s, he was assigned to several churches, one of which was twenty-five kilometers (fifteen and a half miles) from his home. It took all day to walk. He had no food. When he arrived—hot, hungry, exhausted—one woman showed up for worship. She felt awkward being a congregation of one and suggested they say a prayer and then go home. Hector said, "I put on my robes, conducted a full service. We sang hymns. I preached a sermon on hope. I told one discouraged old lady that someday the sanctuary would be full again. It sounded like nonsense at the time."

When the Soviet Union collapsed and Soviet economic aid came to an end, something had to change. One thing that did was the government's attitude about religion. The pope paid a visit. In 1999, Fidel Castro met with seventy-two Protestant-Christian leaders and heard their concerns and criticisms. Castro declared that Cuba was no longer an atheist state but merely secular. Restrictions were lifted. Visitors were welcome, and people began to stream back to church. Old people who had experienced the revolution, young people, young families brought children to be baptized. Young men and women filled up the theological seminary at Matanzos.

It is a controlled, totally socialist economy. The average monthly income is $20. People are poor. And I don't know when I have felt more humble than when, in the worship service in the First Presbyterian Church of Havana, the morning offering was received. These people, these wonderful, brave brothers and sisters in Christ, I concluded, know something about what matters most, about values and faithfulness, that is not particularly easy for us to learn.

Hector said it gently to us once during our ongoing conversation. "It is hard to be a Christian under Communism," he said. "But it is also hard to be a Christian under Capitalism." And I thought about something H. Richard Niebuhr wrote. He was the brother of the more famous Reinhold Niebuhr, and taught theological ethics at Yale. Niebuhr taught that everyone has a "center of value"—on the basis of which our everyday, operating values are founded and have

their meaning. "That center of value," he said, "is essentially theological, whether or not we are traditionally religious. It is our god, the object of our loyalty and worship." Or as Jesus once put it, "No slave can serve two masters. . . . You cannot serve God and wealth." All the older translations used the word *mammon.* It's not used much, but it's a better word. You can't serve God and mammon. Mammon is money, but it's more than money. It's money as a "center of value."

"You can't serve God and mammon," Jesus said, and it came at the end of one of the most baffling stories he ever told. It's about an estate manager, a steward, who works for a wealthy landowner. His job is to collect rent from the tenant farmers, to negotiate percentages, keep the books, and then call them in at harvest time.

This particular manager, Jesus said, was wasting his employer's resources. So the owner fired him. He was ordered to bring the books up to date, clear out his desk, and leave. His response is extraordinary, to say the least. He goes to his office, calls the tenant farmers in, and announces that the rent they thought they owed had been reduced. He doesn't say it but he allows them to conclude that he is responsible for their stroke of good fortune. The farmers are understandably delighted.

When the landowner discovers what has happened, he doesn't react in the way he's supposed to. He doesn't have his former employee put in jail and the decision reversed. Instead, he commends him. Nicely done! He has used his recourses very creatively to turn debtors into friends. He had his priorities straight.

Jesus does not commend this practice but rather the insight into the connection between resources and relationships (see Christian Pohl, *The Christian Century*, Aug. 29, 2001). The point is that you can use resources to help or to hurt people. It is a decision everyone has to make and it is an important one. And then—"You cannot serve two masters. . . . You cannot serve God and mammon."

Notice that Jesus does not condemn wealth. It's not that mammon is bad. Jesus has been consistently misunderstood on this point. He does not condemn ambition, efficiency, or hard work. What he does say is that mammon doesn't work if you're trying to find the meaning and purpose of your life, your salvation in it. It's a lesson we are slowly learning, I think.

Maureen Dowd, in her *New York Times* column last week, "All That Glistens," observed that America, before September 11, was on a binge of overindulgent excess. The Nieman Marcus Christmas catalogue had just arrived in her mailbox, offering a $65 mink coat hanger and a $2,700 jean jacket with a rabbit-trimmed collar and cuffs. Dowd thinks that September 11 has changed the way we think. Our "stuff" had not saved us, even our high-tech military stuff.

Quoting a Taliban spokesperson who said, "Americans fight so they can live and enjoy the material things in their life. We are fighting so we can die in the cause of Allah," Dowd concluded that we have learned the important lesson that our culture is "about more than its glittery surface." The terrorists "succeeded in illuminating not just to the rest of the world but to us—how little our baubles and all our booty have to do with who we really are."

I don't know about you, but I've been thinking a lot about that since September 11, about the gift of life I have been given, each of us have been given: what it is for, its meaning and purpose, what really matters most. I've been thinking a lot about what it is we want to have done and said and been at the end of the day. I found these thoughts underscored as I worshiped with the Cuban Christians who have held tightly and faithfully to their beliefs and their church, with great courage and at great personal cost, for forty years.

I think it is going on across our culture. The *Tribune* reported last week that many Americans are "soul searching, trying to add meaning to their lives," and told about Wall Street traders applying to the Peace Corp and real estate investors taking two years out to teach in inner-city schools.

Someone asked Martin Marty recently why he continues to spend so much time in airplanes, keeping to his grueling schedule of speaking, consulting, lecturing. Marty will fly twenty-two times in the next thirty-six days. But after September 11, he wrote, "the time seems ripe to make an assessment of one's life." And then he shared his:

> My last will and testament are in order. My organs, if any survive, are ready for life-giving transplant.
>
> My family knows what texts and hymns to use at my funeral.
>
> Quoting blind pianist George Shearing, who, when asked, "Have you been blind all your life?" answered, "Not yet," I say "not yet" when asked whether I've done all the seeking and aspiring, enjoying and loving, greeting and cherishing of family, friends, and the strangers whose paths met mine; and asked whether I've heard all the music, and tasted all the wine and food and participated in all the Christian community that I'd like, I answer, "not yet." (*The Christian Century,* Oct. 7, 2001)

It seems like an appropriate time for self-assessment and then intentional choices about our "center of value." It seems appropriate to ask ourselves about what it is we believe enough to live for and sacrifice for.

This church aspires to be a "Light in the City" in every way it can be. This church, or whatever church you claim as yours, represents the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of God's unconditional love. It also represents God's summons to live a life shaped by that good news, a life of grace, and forgiveness, and love, and generosity; a life whose meaning comes, not from getting but from giving, and whose "center of value" is the one who gave his life itself for our salvation. This church represents the invitation of Jesus Christ to make him our personal "center of value," to take up his cross and follow him, to find way to use faithfully our resources of time, energy, creativity, and money. This church is a way for each of us to say what we believe most—by volunteering to be a tutor, for instance, to make a very real difference in the life of a neighbor in need, a child from Cabrini-Green, or to make a significant sacrificial financial pledge to the work and mission of this church.

On our second night in Cuba, at the end of a long and arduous and very hot day, we were driven to the village of Cojimar, the setting of Ernst Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* and the site of a Hemingway memorial. We stopped to look around and pay our respects and then,

before dinner, at a local restaurant—which we were told would provide the best meal of the trip—we were driven through narrow streets to a house church sponsored by the First Presbyterian Church of Havana, which was holding a Friday night worship service. Frankly, it didn't sound like such a great idea. I confess I would have preferred going directly to the restaurant, to air conditioning, food and drink. But we stayed with the program, parked the bus, entered a small narrow house, walked through to the backyard—to find fifty people, all ages, elderly, young, children, babies, waiting for us. Music came from a tape player—gospel songs: "I've got the joy, joy, joy, deep in my heart." They greeted us warmly, Cuban style, which means a hug ordinarily. We sat on folding chairs, with neighborhood sounds—babies crying, dogs barking—filling the night air. We sang hymns, and on behalf of the church Hector expressed sympathy to us, our nation, and our church for what happened to us: tears were shed, hands reached out to pat and comfort. An elder, a chemical engineer, tall and distinguished, stood up and prayed long and fervently for the United States and for the Presbyterian Church and the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago at this difficult time. And then we were introduced to the owner of the home in which the church meets, Wilmina, a jolly, lovely woman whose daughter Rebeca had the day before given birth to a baby boy, Anibal Quesada, her first grandson. She had just come from the hospital to be with us. Wilmina was pretty excited and wanted us to know her joy—which we all shared.

And then Hector said it was testimony time, time to stand up and say what your faith means. And I thought, "Uh, oh." The Cubans were tentative, but not as tentative as American Presbyterians, who are not known for leaping to their feet to talk publicly about what they believe. As a matter of fact, we all sat there looking at our hands as Cuban men and women stood up and said what their faith meant, told us that part of what it meant to them was their love for us and their concern for our country.

I decided somebody better say something to uphold American Presbyterian honor. So I told them our faith meant gratitude to God for them, our unity with them in the holy catholic church, which we affirm our belief in every Sunday. I was thinking all the while about what these affluent, comfortable, secure Americans might meaningfully say to them. And I remembered Anibal Quesada and how we welcome new babies at Fourth Presbyterian Church and I told Wilmina that there would be a red rose in the chancel of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago this Sunday to mark the birth of her new grandson and that I would read his name to 2,500 American Presbyterians and that each one of us would give God thanks for the gift of his life. Wilmina liked that a lot, shed tears in fact, and blew a kiss to me and to each of us—and by proxy—to each of you.

And I thought, this matters, this really matters. This precious little community of faith that transcends nationality and ideology, this amazing church of theirs and ours, this church of Jesus Christ with one of its newest members, this new baby boy, this new Cuban Christian.

Then came the offering and again the humility and gratitude as pesos and dollars were given, and we stood together under the night sky to sing the Doxology: "Praise God from whom all blessing flow."

You cannot serve God and mammon. But you and I can choose to serve God with everything we are and everything we have. And this is a good way to do it.

Amen.

Prayers of the People
By Donna Gray, Interim Associate Pastor for Children and Family Ministry

God, tender and strong God, loving and good: how great your love and goodness are to us. Out of your love you extend your grace and reward those who do not deserve it. It is out of your love that we are not crushed but able to survive the challenges surrounding us.

We dare, O God, to thank you that our lives are sometimes difficult, that we need to face hard experiences if we are to know your power strengthening us and if our characters are to be fully formed.

Defend us against these anxieties and fears, which seek to undermine us. Under your wings shelter us when faith and courage seem fleeting, until they return. Open our eyes to see what you can do for us when we put ourselves at your disposal. Help us to hold firm to your promises and laugh at impossibilities—as we see them becoming possible.

Help us so to worship that we trust you more fully and are better equipped to go further along the road of faith.

Create new hope where we are weary and emotionally bedraggled.
Create new ideas where we are empty and uninspired.
Create new community where we are lonely and feel that no one else cares.
Continue to create hope and life and fellowship.

We know, O God, that as long as you recognize us, all will be well and we need not worry about ourselves or those we love.

And we know that yours is a love that will not let us go.

We rest our weary souls in you and pray, Our Father . . .